

Testimony

Submitted to the Education Committee

March 15, 2010

SB 438 (Raised) An Act Concerning Charter Schools and Open Choice Program Funding

Senator Gaffey and Representative Fleischmann, and fellow members of the Education Committee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today.

My name is Peggy Roell and I am Chair of the Avon Board of Education. I am testifying today in favor of SB 438, An Act Concerning Open Choice Program Funding.

The Town of Avon was not a party in the Sheff litigation. Yet, understanding the importance of diverse learning communities, our taxpayers, for over 10 years, have supported the effort to desegregate Hartford Public Schools. We have enrolled over 60 Hartford children in Avon's schools through the Open Choice program - even as our school district has experienced a fifty percent increase in enrollment in the last 10 years and have continuously faced tight budgets because of this unprecedented growth. The availability of additional seats in Avon may be threatened by budget reductions resulting in teacher reductions and class size increases.

Until recently, the \$2,500 Avon receives from the state for each Project Choice student attending Avon's schools, was adequate to offset the tuition cost for Avon students participating in the regional magnet school programs. Due to the limited amount of ECS dollars Avon receives, the incremental additional cost of the Open Choice students attending school in Avon has been primarily supported by local tax revenues.

The relative balance of the cash in from Open Choice and the cash out for magnet school tuitions ended two years ago. Not only are we now required to pay tuition for any K-12 student whose parents choose to send them to a magnet school, we are also required to pay in excess of \$50,000 per year of tuition for Pre-K students attending magnet schools, even though we are not obligated by state statute to provide pre-K education. This IS another example of an unfunded mandate.

All districts in the state are trying to maintain the instructional integrity and program quality in their schools in a cost effective manner while remaining sensitive and responsive to the current fiscal conditions. The average cost of educating one student in the Capital Region in 2007 was \$12,745. The amount of funding received to educate one student through Open Choice hardly compares to these average costs. I am fearful that as Boards of Education need to make major budget reductions, and face teacher reductions and increases in class size, the continued voluntary efforts of socially conscious school districts to support the goal of encouraging children to cross district lines to reduce the racially isolated schools will be threatened.

SB438 will address district concerns about the legitimate and essential costs for education, and allow districts to meet or exceed Open Choice enrollment projections, hire teachers as needed to maintain class sizes, and assist children to socially and emotional adjust to their new school environs. SB 438 provides further incentives for school districts to voluntarily accept additional children into the Open Choice program, ~~and meet~~

If the state is serious about achieving the goals of Sheff, including improving the quality of education and seeking more opportunities for children to attend more mixed income and non-racially isolated schools, then the state must take responsibility for fully funding this effort. Thank you for your time.